

Politics and the Bible

Desmond Tutu said, 'when people say that the Bible and politics don't mix, I ask them which Bible they are reading.' The Bible is political but it does not contain political theory. This might be because, in the ancient Middle East, a city was just 'a walled thing', literally. You were either behind its walls or you weren't. But in Greece a city or 'polis' tended not to have walls. Coastal watchtowers were a standard defence. So the relationships among the people were less obvious and needed to be thought through. Order was imposed not by a wall but by an idea of what makes for a good city. The quest to nail down exactly what a good arrangement of city life looks like is what politics means. From this Greek experience of thinking through how to order a city, a polis, we get policy, police and politics. The average ancient city, walled or not, was less than half the size of Mansfield.

The biggest change to political theory will be when it catches up with translation software which will soon enable any of us to speak to anyone on the planet in real time. What makes for a good city will be seen to depend on what makes for a good planet. Politics and ecology will merge. The Bible has more to say about ecology than politics and so the Bible will come back into fashion. You heard it here first.

In the Bible there is no theology of politics but there is a theology of politicians. The first one we encounter in the Bible is Joseph. The writer of the Joseph chapters has a vision of human psychology as original as that of Shakespeare, the first Freudian, or Montaigne, the first writer of introspective essays. The writer of Joseph also invents a literary form through which to communicate, namely the romance.

In this romance, Joseph is refreshingly free of what Nietzsche called 'the spirit of revenge'. This freedom enables Joseph to be an attentive politician. He is not fighting the battles of the past. Joseph is the first of the court Jews who will include Henry Kissinger. However, Joseph is more than this. Written after David, Joseph represents the charisma of David. David was a poet and Joseph is presented as a kind of playwright who writes all of the later scenes in this drama, in which he is the hero and his brothers are supporting figures, but not villains. The romance of Joseph has no villains and ends as happily as a romance can, unlike the career of Henry Kissinger.

Joseph's motivation in ordering his brothers is aesthetic. For Joseph politics is art. Just as Tamar wills herself into the story of God's blessing by seducing Judah, so Joseph, who knows the blessing must go to his elder brother Judah, compensates himself by writing a benevolent ending to the tale of Jacob and his twelve sons. Joseph, like his father before him, tries to make himself central to the story of God and the descendants of Abraham.

Unusually for Genesis, God does not intervene directly in Joseph's story. Instead we are told that God's favour is always with Joseph. 2 Samuel, written at the same time, says the same thing about David. The writer of Joseph's story then used this slogan to signal to attentive readers that the chapters about Joseph were written partly to critique the divisive political situation of David's kingdom under his inept grandson Rehoboam. In Genesis God allows the central characters to form their own plots. That is especially true of Joseph. Joseph's career has come easily to him. The only challenge he faces is the aesthetic problem of precisely how and when he will gather his father and brothers and become their worldly saviour.

Why does Joseph delay revealing his identity to Jacob and Benjamin? He desires a total triumph of romance so that his life's story can conclude as marvellously as possible in an aesthetic consummation. If there is cruelty in the delay, it is the selfishness of the child and the aesthete. All of the male heroes of the Hebrew Bible have weaknesses equivalent to this. All politicians are shaped by their weaknesses, including childishness. Prime Minister's Questions resembles nothing as much as a playground. Also, the number of heads of government who lost a parent during childhood is disproportionately large. To paraphrase Nietzsche again, 'That which does not kill us makes us stronger.'

Joseph is not interested in the moral regeneration of his brothers. There is no blaming in this story. Similarly, the author is not worried about Rehoboam's use of slave labour from the north except as it provokes the northern tribes to secede, just as Thatcher was not apparently interested in ending apartheid on moral grounds but on the grounds of economic viability.

Finally, the Bible is not in tune with left-wing notions of collectivism or state-first ends justifying means. Equally the Bible is not in tune with right-wing family-first assumptions. 'Who is my mother and my brothers?...Whoever does God's will is my mother and my brothers.' (Mk 3:33,35) Without a vigilant orientation towards God, every aspect of life becomes disordered. Because of this, 'Keep awake' was the slogan of the early church, and Advent and Lent quickly became established ways of doing exactly that.

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